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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the differences made in the meaning of a passage in English by placing adverbial clauses before (preposing) or after (postposing) the verb. Examples are: "When the wolf arrived, he was picking apples"; "He was picking apples when the wolf arrived"; "While he was picking apples, the wolf arrived"; and "The wolf arrived while he was picking apples." The report is presented in two main parts. The first discusses preposed adverbials, arguing that they have a bidirectional function: serving as a point of departure for communication and also providing a basis for relating the communication to the context. The information contained in such an adverbial is generally of secondary importance in relation to the clause to which it is subordinated. The second part proposes that postposed adverbials serve two purposes: to preserve topic continuity and to convey information of primary importance, perhaps even conveying information that represents a turning point or complication of the story. A 20-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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PREPOSED AND POSTPOSED ADVERBIALS IN ENGLISH[1]

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1 Introduction

Does it make any difference whether an adverbial clause like *when the wolf arrived* precedes the main verb or follows it? For example, do (1a) and (1b) (which allude to the tale of "The Three Little Pigs") mean the same? And what about the same sentences with the subordination reversed, as in (1c,d)?

(1) a. When the wolf arrived, he was picking apples.
  b. He was picking apples when the wolf arrived.
  c. When/While he was picking apples, the wolf arrived.
  d. The wolf arrived when/while he was picking apples.

The great British linguist J. R. Firth always maintained that when there is choice, there is meaning. The purpose of this paper is to explain some of the differences that are made to the meaning of a passage by preposing versus postposing adverbial expressions such as those which appear in (1).

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[1]This paper was originally given at a conference of professors of English (ACOPROLEM) in Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia, South America, in July 1991. Although the claims made in it about preposed adverbials are specifically about English, they have been found to hold also for Koine Greek (Levinsohn 1987 and forthcoming), Biblical Hebrew (Levinsohn 1991) and other languages. I am grateful to Dr. Robert A. Dooley and Dr. David Marshall for observations on an earlier draft of this paper.

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The paper is divided into two main parts. In section 2, I discuss preposed adverbials, arguing that they have a bidirectional function: not only do they serve "as a point of departure for the communication" (Beneš 1962), they also provide the primary basis for relating that communication to the context (Levinsohn 1987:63).[2] The information contained in such an adverbial generally is of secondary importance, in relation to that conveyed by the clause to which it is subordinated. Furthermore, some discontinuity of topic or situation may be discerned when an adverbial is preposed. Conversely, failure to prepose an adverbial may reflect topic or situational continuity.

In section 3, I claim that the desire to preserve topic continuity is but one of the reasons for postposing an adverbial. Another reason is if the information conveyed by the adverbial is of primary importance in the sentence. Under certain circumstances, it may even convey information that represents a "turning point" (Hwang 1990:73) or complication in the story.

2 Preposed adverbials

2.1 Points of departure

It is generally accepted that, as Chafe puts it (1976:50), a preposed constituent such as an adverbial expression of time, space, condition, cause or purpose "sets a...domain within which the main predication holds" (see also Thompson & Longacre 1985:229). Or, in Beneš' words, a preposed constituent serves "as a point of departure for the communication" (loc. cit.). Thus, in (1a), *when the wolf arrived* serves as the temporal point of departure for the assertion *he was picking apples*. In (1c), in contrast, it is *when/while he was picking apples* which serves as the temporal point of departure for the assertion *the wolf arrived*.

Furthermore, the relative importance of the two assertions (*the wolf arrived* and *he [the little pig] was picking apples*) changes between (1a) and (1c). In (1a), *the wolf arrived* is of secondary importance or "backgrounded" (Givón 1990:845), whereas *he was picking apples* is of

[2]Ramsey (1987:385) states, "Preposed IC ['if' clauses] and WC ['when' clauses] are thematically associated to the preceding discourse as well as to the main clause." See also Givón 1990:847, who says, "Preposed ADV-clauses may be viewed as coherence bridges at major thematic junctures."

primary importance. In (1c), *he was picking apples* is of secondary importance, and it is *the wolf arrived* which is of primary importance. (Sentences like (1b,d) are discussed in sect. 3.)

I now illustrate other points of departure.[3]

In (2b) (quoted from Sayers 1985:438), *across the [vegetable] bed* serves as the spatial point of departure for the assertion *ran a double line of small footprints.* ((2a) is similar.)

(2) a. At the back, trained against the wall, stood the peach tree, on which one great, solitary fruit glowed rosily among the dark leafage.
b. Across the bed ran a double line of small footprints.

In (3c) (Sayers pp. 354f), *if the police are coming in* serves as the conditional point of departure for *oughtn't everything to be left just as it is?*[4]

(3) a. "Nothing for it but the police, I'm afraid... Take it all down, eh, what?... Burn the lot [of the decorations]."
b. "... you and Dennison do the drawing-room and I'll do the back room. We'll have a race."
c. "But if the police are coming in," said Dennison, "oughtn't everything to be left just as it is?"

In (4b) (Sayers p. 347), *because Sir Septimus was a very rich man* sets the causal point of departure for the predication which follows; the willingness of the guests to go along with his whims is explained in terms of the benefits they derived, or would derive, from his wealth.

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[3]Except where otherwise indicated, the passages cited are taken from two of Dorothy Sayers' short stories: "The Necklace of Pearls" (1972:347-57), which deals with the identification of a necklace thief, and "Talboys" (pp. 431-53), which concerns happenings related to the theft of some prize peaches.

[4]Haiman (1978:572) explains the tendency for conditional clauses to occur sentence initially in terms of contrastivity: "Like contrastive topics, they are contrastive because they are selected...from a list of possible conditions."

(4) a. He was a simple-hearted man, who really liked plum-pudding and cracker mottoes, and he could not get it out of his head that other people, "at bottom", enjoyed these things also. At Christmas, therefore, he firmly retired to his country house in Essex,...
b. Because Sir Septimus was a very rich man, his guests fell in with the invariable programme.

I found no preposed purpose clauses in Sayers' book, so (5) and (5') are taken from Ernesto Gómez's article "La maestría artesanal" in the June 1991 issue of Avianca's *El mundo en vuelo*. In both the Spanish original (p. 90) and the translation into English (p. 98), the adverbial clause makes the purpose the point of departure for the rest of the sentence.[5]

(5) a. Una típica artesanía de la región surge del ensamblaje de estos rollos de fique teñidos en variados colores.
b. Para obtener los rollos, los artesanos enrollan el fique teñido con anilinas o colores vegetales alrededor de un núcleo de paja.
(5') a. A typical regional handicraft emerged when artisans experimented, assembling different color rolls of hemp, tinted with aniline and vegetable dyes.
b. To obtain a roll, the artisan takes pre-dyed hemp and wraps it over a straw base.

Finally, (6b) (Sayers p. 440) illustrates what Chafe (1976:50) calls an individual point of departure, involving a noun phrase, rather than an adverbial; the expression *I think* serves as a spacer (Dooley 1990:477) to set off the subject (*the other*) as though it had been preposed.

(6) a. One man climbed to the top [of the ladder] and took the peaches,
b. while the other, I think, stood at the foot to keep guard and receive the fruit in a bag or basket or something.

2.2 Types of coherence

In each of the above examples, the preposed constituent, whether adverbial (2-5) or nominal (6), serves as the point of departure for what follows. What is less often

[5]See Thompson (1985) on the function of preposed purpose clauses in English.

recognised about the same constituent is that it typically indicates as well the primary basis for relating what follows to the context.

Preposed constituents relate to the context in one of two overall ways. Positive coherence (Werth 1984:61) involves repeating earlier constituents or at least referring to script-predictable information (Hwang p. 73) such as the next event expected. Thus, in (1a), *when the wolf arrived* would relate back to the wolf having arranged to meet the third little pig at the apple orchard. Similarly, in (1c), *when/while he was picking apples* would relate back to the pig leaving for the orchard to pick apples. In both cases, the information contained in the preposed adverbial clause would be script-predictable. As for (3c), the adverbial clause of condition relates to the earlier discussion of the need to bring the police in. Likewise in (5), the adverbial clause of purpose relates to the mention, in the previous sentence, of rolls of hemp.

Negative coherence (Worth loc. cit.) involves a switch (Andrews 1985:78) from an otherwise similar antecedent. For example, in (2), a spatial switch occurs, from *at the back* to *across the bed*. In (4), Sir Septimus being a very rich man represents a causal switch from the earlier assertion in the same paragraph, *he was a simple-hearted man*, which was adduced as the reason for the Christmas festivities that he offered. In (6), an individual switch occurs, from the earlier expression *one man* to *the other*.

That the preposed constituent indicates the ***primary*** basis for relating the information to the context is illustrated from passages in which more than one constituent could have been preposed. For example, it is just about possible to have expressed (6) as follows:

(6) a. One man climbed to the top and took the peaches;
b'. at the foot, I think, stood the other, to keep guard and receive the fruit in a bag or basket or something.

The relationship of (6b') to (6a) is still that of 'switch'. However, it is no longer a switch from one individual to another, as in (6b), but a switch from one location to another.

I argue that preposed constituents occur at points of ***discontinuity*** in a story (Levinsohn 1990:25; forthcoming, chapter 1). This is particularly clear when the preposed constituent represents a switch from a corresponding one in the context; the preposed item then indicates the nature of

the discontinuity. Thus, a preposed temporal expression typically occurs in connection with a switch from one temporal setting to another; i.e., there is a discontinuity of time, as in (1a,c). Similarly, a preposed spatial expression typically occurs in connection with a switch from one spatial point of departure to another; i.e., there is a discontinuity of space, as in (2b).

Preposed constituents which reiterate earlier information (the 'positive coherence' discussed above) also occur at points of discontinuity. In such instances, the preposed constituent does not reflect the nature of the discontinuity; instead, it manifests itself in some other aspect of the situation. This is illustrated in (7), cited from Sayers p. 350. *This moment* refers to the time during the search in the ***drawing*** room when Dennison makes a remark about feeling awkward (see (7a)), while the expression *at this moment* itself, which occurs at the beginning of a new paragraph, introduces events which lead to the search in the ***back*** room, starting with the reintroduction of Truegood in (7b). Thus, the discontinuity between the two paragraphs is not temporal, but rather involves different locations and, to some extent, different participants.[6]

(7) a. [While Oswald Truegood is in the back room, in connection with a game of 'Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral,' a valuable necklace is found to have disappeared.] After ten minutes' fruitless investigation, Richard Dennison, who had been seated next to the table where the pearls had been placed, began to look rather uncomfortable. "Awkward, you know," he remarked to Wimsey.

b. At this moment, Oswald Truegood put his head through the folding-doors and asked whether they hadn't settled on something by now, because he was getting the fidgets.

In general, the ***absence*** of a preposed constituent, when a potential one occurs, is suggestive of "topic continuity" (Givón 1983:8). This is illustrated in (8), cited from Sayers p. 356; notice the postposed temporal clauses.

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[6]Dooley (personal communication) observes, "Preposed temporal expressions often occur at the boundaries of thematic units in narrative, even though the thematic [dis]continuity is of a different variety. This may have to do with the fact that narratives are organized primarily on a temporal framework, so that a temporal 'space-builder' (Fauconnier 1985:17) might conventionally imply, 'Begin a new space which will have major consequences for the discourse.'"

(8) a. He had spent Christmas here before, and knew perfectly well that 'Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral' would form part of the entertainment.
b. He had only to gather up the necklace from the table when it came to his turn to retire,
c. and he knew he could count on at least five minutes by himself while we were arguing about the choice of a word.

The actions of the above passage naturally cohere, being united by having a single topic, viz., steps towards the stealing of the necklace. The postposed temporal clauses provide orientation as to the time of each step, but do not interrupt the development of the topic.

Consider the effect that preposing the temporal clauses would have had:

(8) a. He had spent Christmas here before, and knew perfectly well that 'Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral' would form part of the entertainment.
b'. When it came to his turn to retire, he had only to gather up the necklace from the table,
c'. then, while we were arguing about the choice of a word, he knew he could count on at least five minutes by himself.

Preposing the adverbial clauses has the effect of relating the three events on the basis of switches of time (notice the use of 'then' in (8c')), as though they were a set of procedures which were to take place at those points. Such preposing, and the consequent introduction of temporal discontinuities, weakens the topic continuity that the Sayers version enjoys.

A comparison of (9b) (from Sayers p. 357) and (9b') illustrates the effect of preposing a postposed conditional clause.

(9) a. It was almost certain that nobody would think of examining the mistletoe for extra berries.
b. I shouldn't have thought of it myself if I hadn't found that pin which he had dropped.

b'. If I hadn't found that pin which he had dropped, I shouldn't have thought of it myself, either.

In the Sayers version, there is topic continuity; although (9b) is an exception to the expectation that *nobody would think of examining the mistletoe for extra berries*, "the coherence appears to lie in the fact that it only came

to be an exception because of extraordinary circumstances; it is 'an exception that proves the rule'" (Dooley, personal communication). In (9b'), in contrast, the preposed conditional clause introduces a discontinuity, viz., the switch to a different, hypothetical situation. To make the resulting assertion reinforce (9a), rather than contrast with it, it is then necessary to add a connector like *either* or *furthermore*.

A comparison of (10b) (from Sayers p. 343) and (10b') illustrates the converse effect, if a preposed conditional clause is postposed.

(10) a. "Did you take it, mother?"
b. "No, I didn't. If I'd seen it, I should have. You are a careless child."

b'. "No, I didn't. I should have if I'd seen it, though. You are a careless child."

The preposed conditional clause in the Sayers version indicates that the relationship to the context is one of switch to a different situation (hypothetical, in this case). Failure to prepose the clause (see (10b')) makes it virtually necessary to mark the switch to a hypothetical situation in some other way, e.g., by the use of *though*.

The English and Spanish versions of the next passage (taken from Gómez 1991) employ different bases for relating the second sentence to the first. In the English translation (p. 96), the preposing of the adverbial clause of purpose introduces a discontinuity or adjustment in the topic, as the writer turns from honoring the artisans involved, to what they do to create their products.

(11) a. It was a solemn moment to pay homage to seven pairs of hands that have mastered the secrets needed to transform seven different types of materials into delicate and graceful objects.
b. To create their products, the master artisans being honored employ time-honored procedures, formulas and secrets obtained from an illustrious tradition.

In the Spanish original, however (p. 89), the purpose clause is not preposed, and the second sentence continues to develop the topic of the artisans (*maestros*).

(11') a. Era un homenaje a siete pares de manos que dominan los secretos necesarios para transformar siete materiales en delicados y asombrosos objetos.

b. Los maestros homenajeados usan, para elaborar sus productos, procedimientos, fórmulas y secretos del oficio provenientes de una ilustre tradición.

(To achieve topic continuity in English, (11b) might have read, *The master artisans being honored employ in the creation of their products time-honored procedures...*)

We have seen, then, that a preposed constituent at a point of discontinuity both establishes a point of departure for what follows and indicates the primary basis for relating what follows to the context. In contrast, the absence of a preposed constituent, when a potential one is postposed, may reflect continuity of topic.[7]

3 Postposed adverbials

I turn, now, to postposed adverbial constituents. I have already argued that one reason for postposing a constituent, rather than preposing it, is if it does not indicate the primary basis for relating what follows to the context, with the corollary that topic continuity is maintained if a constituent is not preposed. Two other, related reasons for postposing adverbials are also found: i) when the adverbial conveys the most important part of the communication; and ii) when the adverbial conveys information that "is important in terms of the overall plot structure" (Hwang p. 73). I discuss these in turn.

3.1 The most important part of the communication

Adverbial constituents are postposed when they convey the most important part of the communication of the sentence.[8] This is illustrated in (12) (Sayers p. 349). The

[7]I do not discuss preposed adverbials which are emphasised in some way. The following passage (Sayers p. 432) illustrates the preposing of a 'foil' (Levinsohn forthcoming, chapter 6), which provides the point of contrast for the point of departure in the next sentence (emphasis indicated in the original):

a. Now, you see what happens.
b. Just ***because*** your boy was told ***not*** to pick the peaches, he picked them.
c. If he hadn't been forbidden to do it, he wouldn't have been so disobedient.

[8]This principle reflects the Prague School claim that the "rheme" (the most important part of the communication) occurs as far to the right of the sentence as the grammar of the language concerned permits,

main point of (12b) is not that the girl took the necklace off (the question presupposes that she had done so), but her reason for doing so.

(12) a. "What have you done with your necklace?"
b. "I took it off, Dad, because I thought it might get broken in 'Dumb Crambo'."

(13) illustrates another sentence in which the post-posed adverbial clause is the most important piece of information being conveyed. Prior to this, the detective has explained how he deduced who the thief was. The listener then asks (Sayers p. 357):

(13) "And you worked it all out when you found the pin?"

It is already known to the listener that the detective had "worked it all out." The main point of his question was that he confirm ***when*** it was that he did so.

One further example—(14)is from Sayers p. 350. (14') is the equivalent form with the adverbial preposed.

(14) I think, Sir Septimus, it would be a relief to the minds of everybody present if we could all be searched.

(14') I think, Sir Septimus, if we could all be searched, it would be a relief to the minds of everybody present.

The main point of this communication, in the Sayers version, is the suggestion that 'we all be searched'. If the adverbial clause were preposed, as in (14'), the main point would be the relieving of the minds of everybody present, were the suggestion to be carried out.[9]

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unless it is specially marked to the contrary; see Firbas 1964:115. Similar claims are made by other authors, often using different terminology. For example, Erteschik-Shir (quoted in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983:240ff) discusses the same principle in terms of "dominance." (I am grateful to Dr. David Marshall for drawing my attention to this book.)

[9]These claims apply only to written material. In oral speech, intonation is often used to indicate when the rheme is not final; see footnote 8.

3.2 Information important to the plot

In most of the passages considered to date, the events described in the adverbial clauses (whether real, potential or hypothetical) occur prior to those presented in the clauses to which they are subordinated. Thus:

i) the reason posited in a *because* clause is true before the event of the corresponding independent one (e.g. (12b));

ii) the event described in a *when* clause takes place before the one presented in the corresponding independent clause (e.g. (13));

iii) the condition of certain types of *if* clauses has to be true before the event of the corresponding independent one can take place (e.g. (14)).

Hwang has pointed out (p. 69) that there is a marked usage of postposed *when* clauses, when they describe an event that took place ***after*** that of the clause to which they are subordinated. As examples of this, she quotes sentences similar to (1b), repeated below. (The arrival of the wolf took place after the little pig started picking apples.)

(1) b. He was picking apples when the wolf arrived.

Such clauses convey information which "is 'important' in terms of the overall plot structure," such as indicating "a turning point or peak in the global context." When this happens, "the independent clause preceding the adverbial clause usually reports setting, background, or successive routine events" (p. 73). Thus, in (1b), the arrival of the wolf (before the little pig had finished picking apples) introduces an important, new complication into the story.[10]

(15) illustrates the same device used by Sayers (p. 349), to introduce the discovery that the necklace has been stolen. (The use of the pluperfect ensures that the independent clause be interpreted as background information.)

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[10]In (1d), the independent clause preceding the adverbial reports an important event *(the wolf arrived)*, and the adverbial clause, background information *(he was picking apples)*. In such a sentence, the adverbial clause would have been postposed to maintain topic continuity. (See end of sect. 2.)

(15) Oswald Truegood had retired into the back room and shut the door behind him while the party discussed the next subject of examination, when suddenly Sir Septimus broke in on the argument by calling to his daughter: "Hullo, Margy! What have you done with your necklace?"

Later in the same story, at the point which leads to the identification of the thief, Sayers (p. 354) again uses the device:

(16) The party assembled gradually, but, as though by common consent, nothing was said about pearls until after breakfast, when Oswald Truegood took the bull by the horns.

Hwang (p. 69) points out that, if a ***when*** clause is used in this way, it is often not possible to prepose the adverbial clause. This is true of (16), for instance; (16') is unacceptable:

(16') *...when Oswald Truegood took the bull by the horns, nothing was said about pearls until after breakfast.

4 Conclusion

I have shown that it does make a difference whether an adverbial expression precedes the main verb or follows it. Whereas the information conveyed in a preposed adverbial is backgrounded with respect to that of the clause to which it is subordinated, a postposed adverbial may well convey the most important piece of information in the sentence. Whereas the presence of a preposed adverbial reflects a discontinuity of topic or situation, a postposed adverbial may well reflect topic continuity. In addition, only preposed adverbials establish the point of departure for the communication and indicate the primary basis for relating what follows to the context, whereas only postposed adverbials are used to highlight a turning point or complication in a story.

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